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PROGRAM All Things Considered

STATION WETA Radio  
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DATE July 20, 1982 5:00 P.M.

CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT British Spy Story

NOAH ADAMS: Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has her hands full this week: IRA violence, palace security problems, and now a new spy scandal. The last major spy scandal erupted when Sir Anthony Blount, the famous art historian, was exposed as a Soviet spy and stripped of his knighthood.

But as NPR's Robert Siegel reports from London, this case is very different from the Blount affair.

ROBERT SIEGEL: This is one British spy story that does not seem to leap from the pages of a John LeCarre novel. So far, it involves no public school boys turned wartime spies and cold war spy masters. It has less to do with cloaks and daggers than with computers and long-range antennae.

The leak was at GCHQ, Governemnt Communications Headquarters, in Cheltenham (?), about 95 miles northwest of London. It's the equivalent of our National Security Administration, intercepting foreign communications and storing the data gathered in computers.

The only person charged in this story is 44-year-old Geoffrey Arthur Prine (?), who worked at GCHQ after leaving the Royal Air Force in 1968 until 1977. He was arraigned last Thursday for violating Britain's Official Secrets Act. At his arraignment, the prosecution said that he'd passed information to others, information that could have been useful to an enemy. The prosecution cited acts committed from 1968 until 1981, well after Prine had left GCHQ.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made a statement about the case to the House of Commons today, but the statement turned

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out to be highly unrevealing.

PRIME MINISTER MARGARET THATCHER: Any charge under Section I of the Official Secrets Act is, of course, serious and must give rise to concern. The House will understand, however, that until trial proceedings are completed, I cannot, for obvious reasons, make any statement or answer questions on this case or on related matters.

SIEGEL: So, a number of parliamentary questions -- is computer security adequate at GCHQ? Is there blackmail involved? -- went unanswered.

The most important unanswered question is, who is the person to whom Geoffrey Arthur Prine leaked British intelligence secrets? Mrs. Thatcher stressed today that only one person, Prine, has been charged.

Another question: Given GCHQ's close relationship to the NSA, has American intelligence been compromised by the leak in Cheltenham?

And then there's the question that was put in the House of Commons today and got no answer: Was Prine arrested as the result of a security investigation, or did British police stumble upon his activities at Cheltenham? The reason for that question is that Prine, in addition to being charged with violating the Official Secrets Act, is also awaiting trial on three charges of indecent assault on teen-aged girls aged between 13 and 16.